

Message Text

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FM AMEMBASSY CANBERRA
TO SECSTATE WASHDC 1158
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AMEMBASSY LONDON
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AMCONSUL BRISBANE
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 1 OF 3 CANBERRA 5883

CINCPAC FOR POLAD

E.O. 11652: GDS

TAGS: ELAB, PFOR, PINT, AS

SUBJECT: AUSTRALIAN POLITICAL SCENE: INDUSTRIAL PROBLEMS AND
ELECTION PROSPECTS

1. SUMMARY: FOR A VARIETY OF REASONS, PM FRASER IS
WEIGHING THE POSSIBILITY OF HOLDING FEDERAL ELECTIONS
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(FOR THE FULL LOWER HOUSE AND FOR HALF THE SENATE) BE-
FORE THE END OF 1977. GIVEN ECONOMIC DIFFICULTIES, AN
"ELECTION BUDGET," LABOR PROBLEMS, AND DIVISIONS WITHIN
THE OPPOSITION, THERE IS A FAIR CHANCE THAT HE WILL DO
SO TO MINIMIZE THE L-NCP COALITION'S BACKBENCH LOSSES.
END SUMMARY.

2. ALTHOUGH LOWER HOUSE ELECTIONS COULD BE PUT OFF UNTIL AS LATE AS FEBRUARY 1979, THERE IS INCREASING SPECULATION THAT PM FRASER MIGHT DECIDE TO GO TO THE POLLS AS EARLY AS DECEMBER 1977. FRASER WILL HAVE TO CONSIDER A MULTITUDE OF PROSPECTS BEFORE REACHING A DECISION.

3. ITEMS THAT WOULD APPEAR TO FAVOR AN EARLY ELECTION ARE:

A) THE ECONOMIC SITUATION: ALTHOUGH ELECTED TO OFFICE PRIMARILY ON A PLATFORM OF RETURNING AUSTRALIA TO ECONOMIC PROGRESS AND GROWTH FOLLOWING THREE YEARS OF OFTEN INEPT, MISTAKE-RIDDEN ACTION BY THE ALP, THE LIBERAL NCP COALITION HAS NOT BEEN VERY EFFECTIVE IN BRINGING IT OFF. A SENSE OF GENERAL MALAISE STILL EXISTS AMONG BUSINESSMEN. THERE ARE A GROWING NUMBER OF PEOPLE WHO BELIEVE THAT THE ECONOMY IS NOT BEING MANAGED ANY BETTER UNDER FRASER THAN IT WAS UNDER WHITLAM. WITH A HOPED-FOR REAL GROWTH RATE OF ONLY FOUR PERCENT OVER THE NEXT YEAR (WHICH MIGHT VERY WELL NOT BE POSSIBLE) THE PM MIGHT CALL AN EARLY ELECTION TO AVOID EVEN FURTHER EROSION IN CONFIDENCE WITH A CONSEQUENT GREATER NUMBER OF LOSSES IN BOTH HOUSES OF PARLIAMENT.

B) UNEMPLOYMENT: UNEMPLOYMENT HAS CONTINUED TO
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INCREASE UNDER THE COALITION GOVERNMENT AND, AS THE GOVERNMENT ADMITTED IN ITS FEDERAL BUDGET PRESENTATION, THE SITUATION IS NOT LIKELY TO IMPROVE VERY MUCH OVER THE NEXT YEAR. ALP AND UNION LEADERS PREDICT THAT UNEMPLOYMENT WILL INCREASE TO OVER SEVEN PERCENT BETWEEN NOW AND NEXT YEAR'S BUDGET PRESENTATION. THIS PROBLEM WILL BE HIGHLIGHTED IN FEBRUARY WHEN THOUSANDS OF SCHOOL LEAVERS ENTER THE JOB MARKET.

C) CUTS IN WELFARE PROGRAMS: THE FRASER GOVERNMENT HAS MADE INCREASING CUTS IN ALL SORTS OF WELFARE PROGRAMS INCLUDING MEDIBANK, THE ARTS, PUBLIC EDUCATION, ABORIGINAL AFFAIRS, ETC. THESE CUTS WERE JUSTIFIED ON THE GROUNDS THAT IT WAS NECESSARY TO COMBAT INFLATION. WHILE INFLATION WAS CUT DURING THE LAST YEAR FROM APPROXIMATELY 15 PERCENT TO 10.2 PERCENT (EXCLUDING THE RISE CAUSED BY MEDIBANK LEGISLATION) MANY OBSERVERS BELIEVE THAT IT WILL REMAIN AT ABOUT TEN PERCENT OVER THE NEXT YEAR. THIS WILL BE INTERPRETED AS ANOTHER FAILURE ON THE PART OF THE GOVERNMENT.

D) LAST OF AN EFFECTIVE OPPOSITION: WHITLAM IS

GENERALLY DISCREDITED AS AN EFFECTIVE FUTURE LEADER OF AUSTRALIA. FRASER WILL MAKE WHITLAM'S CREDIBILITY AND THE FAILURES OF THE PREVIOUS WHITLAM GOVERNMENT MAJOR ISSUES IN ANY CAMPAIGN. EMBASSY OBSERVERS HAVE BEEN UNABLE TO FIND ANY ALP LEADERS WHO BELIEVE WHITLAM CAN WIN AN ELECTION AGAINST FRASER, EXCEPT WHITLAM HIMSELF. FRASER MUST WEIGH THE POSSIBILITY THAT THE ALP MIGHT REPLACE WHITLAM IF FRASER DELAYS GOING TO THE PEOPLE FOR A YEAR AND ONE-HALF.

4. THERE ARE ALSO A NUMBER OF FACTORS THAT MIGHT LEAD FRASER TO DELAY ELECTIONS UNTIL LATE 1978. THERE ARE:

A) POLITICAL CONSIDERATIONS: IF FRASER GOES TO
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THE POLLS ONLY TWO YEARS AFTER HIS DECEMBER 1975 VICTORY, THIS WILL BE READ BY MANY AUSTRALIANS AS AN INDICATION THAT HIS DECISION WAS TAKEN PURELY FOR POLITICAL ADVANTAGE. FRASER ALREADY HAS THE LARGEST PARLIAMENTARY MAJORITY IN AUSTRALIAN HISTORY, AND CAN AFFORD TO LOSE A NUMBER OF SEATS IN ANY EVENTUAL ELECTION. HOWEVER, THERE IS AMPLE PRECEDENT FOR ELECTIONS ON PURE POLITICAL GROUNDS. SOUTH AUSTRALIA HAS JUST CALLED FOR ELECTIONS ALMOST A YEAR IN ADVANCE OF TERMINATION OF THE GOVERNMENT'S MANDATE BECAUSE THE GOVERNING ALP HAS A MAJORITY OF ONE AND EXPECTS TO INCREASE IT.

B) THE GOVERNOR-GENERAL WILL HAVE TO AGREE TO HOLD EARLY ELECTIONS. ALTHOUGH HIS APPROVAL IS LIKELY, IT CANNOT BE TAKEN FOR GRANTED. SIR JOHN KERR HAS PROVEN IN THE PAST THAT HE IS AN INDEPENDENT-MINDED MAN. HE MIGHT DECLINE TO ISSUE THE WRITS ON THE GROUNDS THAT PRECIPITOUS ELECTIONS CAN BE JUSTIFIED ONLY ON THE GROUNDS OF NARROW POLITICAL ADVANTAGE.

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RUEHBAGJJAMCONSUL SYDNEY 5223
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AMCONSUL BRISBANE
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C) SOUTH AUSTRALIAN ELECTIONS: FRASER WILL CARE-
FULLY REVIEW THIS ELECTION RESULT SCHEDULED FOR SEPTEMBER
17, 1977. ALTHOUGH THE MAIN ISSUE WILL BE PREMIER DUNSTAN'S
PERSONAL POPULATIRY--AND IT IS VERY HIGH--FRASER WILL RE-
CEIVE SOME INDICATION OF POLITICAL TRENDS. FRASER WILL ALSO
BE WATCHING DON CHIPP'S NEW CENTRIST PARTY, THE AUSTRALIAN
DEMOCRATS, WHICH WILL BE FACING ITS FIRST TEST IN THE SOUTH
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AUSTRALIAN ELECTIONS. CHIPP AND THE LEADER OF THE NEW LIBERAL
MOVEMENT, ROBIN MILLHOUSE, WILL BE ALIGNED AND THIS COULD
HAVE IMPORTANT IMPLICATIONS FOR FRASER'S COALITION. MANY
OBSERVERS BELIEVE THAT CHIPP'S NEW PARTY COULD TAKE AS MANY
AS SIX SEATS IN FEDERAL HALF-SENATE ELECTIONS AND THEREBY
OBTAIN THE BALANCE OF POWER IN THE UPPER HOUSE.

D) QUEENSLAND ELECTIONS: PREMIER BJELKE-PETERSON WILL
ALMOST CERTAINLY CALL FOR ELECTIONS IN QUEENSLAND IN OCTOBER
1977. THE DECIMATED QUEENSLAND ALP WILL ALMOST CERTAINLY
MAKE SOME GAINS. THE EXTENT OF THIS GAIN WILL BE IMPORTANT
TO FRASER'S ASSESSMENT.

E) BUDGET REACTION: THE BUDGET ITSELF HAS BEEN CALLED

AN "ELECTION BUDGET" BECAUSE THERE WILL HAVE TO BE AT LEAST A HALF-SENATE ELECTION BY MAY 1978. HOWEVER, IT IS NOT DESIGNED AS A PURE BID FOR VOTES, E.G., THERE IS A CLEAR LACK OF MEASURES TO FOSTER ECONOMIC STIMULUS. IT IS CLEAR FROM THE BUDGET THAT THE FRASER GOVERNMENT HAS SELECTED ITS CONSTITUENCY VERY CAREFULLY; MIDDLE CLASS WAGE EARNERS, WHITE COLLAR WORKERS, AND BOTH SMALL AND BIG BUSINESSES. RESTRUCTURING THE TAX LAWS STANDS TO PUT MORE THAN ONE BILLION ADDITIONAL DOLLARS IN THE POCKETS OF WAGE-EARNERS; AND TAXES ON POLITICALLY SENSITIVE ITEMS SUCH AS ALCOHOL AND CIGARETTES WERE NOT RAISED AT ALL, NOR WAS A USER TAX PUT ON TELEVISION. GASOLINE PRICES WILL RISE A BIT, BUT THE GOVERNMENT WILL BE ABLE TO ARGUE THAT AUSTRALIAN GASOLINE IS STILL ABOUT THE CHEAPEST OF ANY INDUSTRIALIZED COUNTRY EXCEPT THE U.S. TO CHEER THE CONSERVATIVE SIDE OF THE SPECTRUM, FUNDS FOR SUCH INSTITUTIONS AS THE NATIONAL GALLERY, AND OTHER ARTISTIC SECTORS HAVE BEEN CUT (ONLY A SMALL PERCENTAGE OF AUSTRALIAN VOTERS FREQUENT THE

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MUSEUMS, THEATERS AND CONCERT HALLS); EMPLOYMENT IN THE PUBLIC SECTOR WILL BE CUT BY ANOTHER 3,000 (12,500 GOVERNMENT EMPLOYEES ALREADY HAVE BEEN DROPPED SINCE JULY 1975); A\$5 MILLION HAS BEEN SLASHED FROM EXPENDITURES ON HOUSING FOR ABORIGINES (FEW OF WHOM WOULD VOTE FOR THE PRESENT CONSERVATIVE GOVERNMENT ANYWAY). STUDENTS (WHO MIGHT OTHERWISE BE A NOISY OPPOSITION) HAVE BEEN BOUGHT OFF WITH WHAT IS TOUTED AS A 9.8 PERCENT RISE IN THEIR ALLOWANCES. MODERATES WILL BE CHEERED BY THE FACT THAT ALTHOUGH EXPENDITURES ON CAPITAL CONSTRUCTION PROJECTS WILL FALL (SUCH AS HOSPITAL AND FREEWAY CONSTRUCTION), THE PENSION PURSE HAS BEEN BOOSTED AND MOST MEDICAL SERVICES WILL NOT SUFFER. DEFENSE WAS GIVEN "HIGH PRIORITY" BUT IN FACT WILL GET LITTLE OR POSSIBLY EVEN NO ADDITIONAL MONEY FOR MAJOR EQUIPMENT PURCHASES. PROGRESSIVES WILL BE CHEERED BY ADDITIONAL FUNDS FOR FOREIGN AID, AND CONSERVATIVES WILL DRAW COMFORT FROM THE FACT THAT MOST IF IT WILL GO TO PAPUA NEW GUINEA, WHERE AUSTRALIA HAS SUBSTANTIAL ECONOMIC INTERESTS. A SUBSTANTIAL CONSTITUENCY OF THE PRESENT COALITION DISAPPOINTED AND ANGERED BY THE BUDGET IS THE SMALL FARMER. AGRICULTURE RECEIVED ONLY A\$53 MILLION FOR FARM ASSISTANCE (DISEASE ERADICATION PROGRAMS, FERTILIZER SUBSIDIES, LOANS TO FARMERS FOR CAPITAL IMPROVEMENTS, ETC) WHICH WILL MAINLY BENEFIT LARGE LAND OWNERS. THE GOA IS ANXIOUSLY AWAITING REACTION TO WHAT TREASURER PHILLIP LYNCH HAS TERMED "THE BEST AUSTRALIAN BUDGET EVER."

F) CPI INDEX: THE GOVERNMENT HOPES THAT THE NEXT

QUARTERLY CONSUMER PRICE INDEX (COMING OUT IN OCTOBER)
WILL REFLECT A GAIN OF LESS THAN TWO PERCENT IN THE COST
OF LIVING. IF SO, THE GOVERNMENT WILL BE ABLE TO CLAIM
THAT ITS POLICIES HAVE LED TO AN ANNUAL INFLATION RATE
OF LESS THAN TEN PERCENT.

G) UNION BASHING: AS REPORTED IN CANBERRA 5604,
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NLP LEADERS LED BY IAN SINCLAIR HAVE CONDUCTED AND ARE
CONDUCTING A STRONG ATTACK ON AUSTRALIAN UNIONS AND
THEIR ALLEGED DISRUPTION OF THE AUSTRALIAN ECONOMY.

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THE GOVERNMENT RUSHED THROUGH PERLIAMENT A TOUGH, NEW ANTI-STRIKE LAW ON AUGUST 18-19. THIS LAW GIVES THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT THE RIGHT TO DISMISS OR LAY OFF COMMONWEALTH EMPLOYEES INVOLVED IN STRIKES. THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT WILL ALSO HAVE THE RIGHT TO SUSPEND OR DISMISS EMPLOYEES WHO STAGE SLOW-DOWNS OR WHO IMPOSE WORK BANS, AND WILL GIVE THE GOVERNMENT POWER TO LAY
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OFF COMMONWEALTH EMPLOYEES WHO CANNOT PERFORM THEIR FUNCTIONS BECAUSE OF STRIKES IN PRIVATE INDUSTRY. THE LAW WAS RUSHED THROUGH BECAUSE OF THE SYDNEY MAIL STRIKE WHICH ENDED, LARGELY THROUGH THE EFFORTS OF ACTU PRESIDENT BOB HAWKE, ON AUGUST 19, ONLY A FEW HOURS AFTER THE ANTI-STRIKE LAW WAS PASSED. HAWKE HAS NOW SAID THAT HE IS HOPEFUL THAT THE GOVERNMENT WILL WITHDRAW THE LEGISLATION. MINISTER FOR INDUSTRIAL RELATIONS TONY STREET INFORMED PARLIAMENT DURING DEBATE ON THE BILL THAT HE HOPED THE GOVERNMENT WOULD NOT BE FORCED TO USE THE PROPOSED INDUSTRIAL LEGISLATION. HOWEVER, IT IS PROBABLE THAT THE GOVERNMENT WILL KEEP THE LAW IN RESERVE FOR POSSIBLE USE IN COMBATTING FUTURE STRIKES IN THE PUBLIC SECTOR. MANY LABOR AND ALP LEADERS ARE CONVINCED THAT FRASER IS DELIBERATELY SEEKING CONFRONTATION WITH THE UNIONS AS AN ELECTION ISSUE. HAWKE AND OTHERS HAVE TERMED THE LEGISLATION "FACIST-TYPE," AND THERE HAVE BEEN RUMBLINGS OF A POSSIBLE GENERAL STRIKE IN OPPOSITION TO IT. FRASER, SUPPORTED BY POLLS SHOWING THAT UNIONS ARE HBLAMED BY A LARGE MAJORITY OF AUSTRALIANS FOR CAUSING AUSTRALIA'S ECONOMIC PROBLEMS, COULD CLEARLY USE THIS ISSUE IN A TOUGH "LAW AND ORDER" CAMPAIGN.

H) URANIUM: THE GOVERNMENT WILL ALMOST CERTAINLY GIVE A FAVORABLE DECISION TO THE MINING AND EXPORT OF URANIUM IN THE NEAR FUTURE. AS REPORTED IN CANBERRA 4889, THIS IS A HIGHLY CONTENTIOUS ISSUE IN AUSTRALIA. IT IS ALSO AN ISSUE THAT DIVIDES THE ALP. VARIOUS LEADERS, INCLUDING BOB HAWKE, PRESIDENT OF THE ACTU AND THE ALP, ARE IN FAVOR OF MINING URANIUM IN OPPOSITION TO THE ALP PARTY PLATFORM, WHICH CALLS FOR A MINIMUM TWO-YEAR MORATORIUM ON URANIUM MINING. URANIUM WILL CERTAINLY BE AN ELECTION ISSUE AND IT WILL PERMIT
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THE PRIME MINISTER TO PROFIT FROM DIVISIONS WITHIN THE
ALP.

5. COMMENT: FRASER, AND IT WILL BE VERY MUCH HIS
PERSONAL DECISION, WILL HAVE TO DECIDE BY EARLY NOVEMBER
IF HE WANTS TO GO TO THE POLLS BEFORE THE END OF THE
YEAR. WHILE IT IS ALWAYS RISKY TO SPECULATE ON THE
TIMING OF ELECTIONS, IT IS CLEAR THAT THE PM IS SETTING
THE STAGE FOR AN EARLY RETURN TO THE POLLS IF HE BELIEVES
IT'S IN THE GOVERNMENT'S ADVANTAGE. GIVEN AN ECONOMIC
SITUATION THAT IS AT BEST UNLIKELY TO IMPROVE, THE
FEDERAL BUDGET, A GENERALLY POPULAR MOVE TOWARD
CONFRONTATION WITH THE UNIONS, AND INEFFECTIVE LABOR
OPPOSITION, WE BELIEVE THAT THERE IS A FAIR CHANCE THAT
HE WILL GO TO THE POLLS BEFORE THE END OF THE YEAR, OR
AT THE LATEST BY MAY 1978. ALSTON

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